

Richard Cohen

Part 2/22/94

What Reagan Could Say About North

Ronald Reagan's disdain for big government is well known. He loathes it. Aside from anticommunism, antipathy for government was about the sum and substance of his political ideology. Now, a bit more than five years after Reagan left the Oval Office, he is about to strike his biggest blow against government yet. He's determined to remain silent on Oliver North.

North is the benedicted prevaricator running for the Senate from Virginia. Given that North was convicted of shredding evidence, accepting an illegal gratuity and—most important—lying to Congress, his candidacy is like an atheist bidding to be pope. North is a free and rich man today by dint of legal legerdemain—a technical appeal that, in other cases, has people like him up in arms about ACLU lawyers and daffy judges.

Had North limited his lying to Congress, most Americans might consider this a brouhaha of no concern to them. But a group of former Reagan and Bush administration officials is as exercised about North as are members of Congress. His candidacy is opposed by George Shultz, Alexander Haig, Caspar Weinberger, Edwin Meese III and Frank Carlucci. Even North's old Iran-contra compadre, retired Gen. John Singlaub, has blasted him. Their grievances: North sometimes does not know the truth or prefers not to speak it. Specifically, they charge that North embellished his role in Reagan's White House, exaggerated his relationship with the president and lied when he fingered Reagan as the brains behind Iran-contra.

Much of the Reagan loyalists' case against North was laid out in the June 1993 Reader's Digest. The conservative publication caught North saying he was with Reagan when others say he wasn't and taking

credit for decisions he had no part in. Even North's vaunted \$13,800 security fence for his suburban Virginia home—erected in a harrumph of justification after a purported death threat—makes some former officials apoplectic. Retired Air Force Gen. Richard Secord, no liberal by any means, told the Digest that North knew well that he should never have accepted the fence. "You go over those rules all the time," he said. "They are very well known." This was not "timor in Uniform."

North has an answer for every charge. So brain-ning is he with cinematic vainglory, so certain is he that he alone stood between the awful Sandinistas and the children, orphans and occasional virgins of middle America, that his delivery is faultless. He is Jimmy Stewart in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," John Wayne in a zillion war movies or, if you will, G. Gordon Liddy back when Liddy was a mere sockpuppet and not a talk radio personality. In the tradition of the Marines, North could certainly take a hill, but what he would do with Hermann Korschach's ink blots is another matter.

The men now allied against North could stock a whole administration—and, in fact, they once did. Some are not connected with Virginia. They evidently feel so strongly about North that they have injected themselves into the sort of intraparty struggle where they would be expected to stay neutral. Still, their statements about North's honesty and judgment have a who-struck-John quality to them—their word against his, insufficient to snap North's fans out of their delirium. What's needed in the political equivalent of Cecil B. De Mille's voice in one of his biblical film epics: a word from an untarnished authority.

It's Reagan who could polish off North. The former

Marine once claimed that he was with his president in the White House's living quarters when the medical students evacuated from Grenada came back to the United States. North told friends that Reagan put his arms around him and said, "I told you not to worry. You can trust Americans." Good story—except Reagan's press secretary, Martin Fitzwater, said North was not with the president that day. North told the Digest he will not now comment on the story.

But Reagan could. The former president, though, will say nothing. He abides by the Republican Party's so-called 11th Commandment—"Thou shall not speak ill of a fellow Republican." This raises an interesting question: What's more important—the silly 11th Commandment or the possibility that a convicted liar will become a United States senator? (I'm ignoring the reversal on appeal, as conservatives have so instructed over the years.) Is Reagan's first loyalty to his country or his party? Apparently, it's to his party—not, mind you, that a North primary victory would do the GOP much good. He may be the one guy who could lose to Chuck Robb, the Democratic incumbent.

A word from the ex-president would make even North's most fervent supporters pause and think. Reagan could point out, for instance, that while North has said he met twice a week with him, White House logs put the grand total at only 19 meetings—and then others were always present. Reagan could do both his party and his country a service by speaking up. (North's primary opponent, James Miller, is a good guy.)

May I suggest that Reagan ignore the 11th Commandment and refer to the Ninth instead. It's the one about bearing false witness. His silence amounts to that.